

## APOCALYPTIC EXPRESSIONS IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC WORLD

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In the usual circular way apocalyptic literature tends to be defined in terms of recurring elements in works that are considered to be apocalypses.<sup>1</sup> Modern scholarship has been largely concerned with the origin(s) of the genre, the possibility of cross cultural “influences,” and the use of historical references in such texts in order to date them. By the early centuries of the common era the original meaning of *apocalypsis* as an experience of revelatory spiritual ascension had begun to be overlaid and largely replaced by the eschatological content of the message, which is generally the way “apocalypse” is understood and used today.<sup>2</sup> The passage of the soul through the spheres and an expectation that the Roman Empire would last until the last days were added during Late Antiquity. In many ways the renewed spate of apocalyptic literature dating from early Islamic times appears to be more “historical” in nature relating to and perhaps occasioned by contemporary events and circumstances beginning with the great war between the Byzantines and Sasanians in the early seventh century<sup>3</sup> and continuing with the events and aftermath of the early Islamic conquests. It is surely significant that such expressions surfaced in multiple religious traditions: Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Mandaean, and Muslim. Some comparative analysis of this material is thus possible, useful, and desirable. The four articles presented here are an attempt in this direction by examining and juxtaposing apocalyptic themes in Syriac and Coptic Christian, Zoroastrian, and Muslim literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of this genre on literary grounds and the establishment of a typology see J.J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia*, 14 (1970), 1-20.

<sup>2</sup> M. Smith, “On the History of ΑΠΟΚΑΛΥΠΤΩ and ΑΠΟΚΑΛΥΨΙΣ,” in D. Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen, 1983), 18-19. See also I.P. Culianu, *Psychanodia I. A Survey of the evidence concerning the Ascension of the soul and its relevance* (Leiden, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See I. Lévi, “L’Apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Seroès,” *Revue des Études Juives*, 68 (1914), 129-60; 71 (1920), 57-65; and B. Wheeler, “Imagining the Sassanian capture of Jerusalem: ‘The Prophecy and Dream of Zerubbabel’ and Antiochus Strategos’ ‘Capture of Jerusalem,’” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 57 (1991), 69-85.

Unfortunately a companion article on Jewish apocalyptic expressions in this period was not available for inclusion.<sup>4</sup>

The first article, by Villagomez, provides a general overview of recent apocalyptic studies and of scholarship on Syriac apocalyptic literature in particular, and notes that, whereas cataclysmic events were interpreted as God's punishment for the sins of Christians during Late Antiquity, in early Islamic times they were also seen as signs of the approach of the apocalyptic age. The second article, by Iskander, examines the Copto-Arabic "Apocalypse of Samuel." His argument for redating this work probably to the eleventh century C.E. relates to the historical significance of the socio-religious changes and pressures attested to in the text. The third article, by Daryaei, uses Zoroastrian apocalyptic expressions to gauge that community's reaction to the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, to the 'Abbāsī "revolution," and to the sectarian revolt of the Khorramiyya. In the final article, Campbell surveys themes in apocalyptic Muslim *aḥādīth*, particularly those aimed at discouraging participation in civil strife and rebellion against even an unjust ruler. It is important to include this material along with the first three cases here by way of demonstrating that apocalyptic fears/hopes existed in the same period among the politically dominant religious group as well as among the subject communities. That is, in this period apocalyptic expressions were not confined to the adherents of downtrodden, conquered religious populations. Apocalyptic expectations appear to have been encouraged both among Syriac using Christians and among Muslims by the events associated with the second Muslim *fitna* during and after the 680s. At the same time Campbell notes the sense of bewilderment, despair, and alienation among an apparently large sector of the Muslim population (at least these *aḥādīth* were preserved in the majoritarian collections). The quietist position of avoiding civil strife at almost any cost also seems to have a Murjī'ī tone, while the advice not to rebel against even unjust rulers surely contributed to the stability of authoritarian forms of government, and such *aḥādīth* may, in fact, have been encouraged by Muslim rulers. However, with one notable exception,<sup>5</sup> the common literary definition of apocalyptic works does not fit most of the Islamic material; its membership in the apocalyptic category is more a matter of content than of form.

The similarities among these apocalyptic traditions are at least as important as their differences. The theme of sinning believers runs through all of

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief survey of Jewish apocalyptic literature from this period see B. Kedar, "The Arab Conquests and Agriculture: A Seventh-Century Apocalypse, Satellite Imagery, and Paly-nology," *Asian and African Studies*, 19 (1985), 1-15.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Cook, "An Early Islamic Apocalyptic Chronicle," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 52 (1995), 25-29; and W. Madelung, "Apocalyptic Prophecies in Hims in the Umayyad Age," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 31 (1986), 141-185. Cook suggests that the narrative structure of this chronicle was inspired by Christian apocalyptic.

them,<sup>6</sup> as well as the demonization (literally in the Zoroastrian case) of converts to Islam in the non-Muslim material. Another common theme is the loss of status due to the overturning of the social order; the complaints of pseudo-Samuel sound like those of ninth- and tenth-century *mohads*. There is also a common method of using recognizable current or recent events as "predictions" of the end of time, which is represented as being in the near future. Expressions of anxiety, alienation, escape, and hope for immanent relief can be found in all of these traditions in what Madelung has called writing the future on one's own terms.<sup>7</sup> These similar themes are, of course, formulated according to the presuppositions of different religious traditions. What ties these articles together is their authors' use of the apocalyptic material to reveal the attitudes current among various religious communities rather than to elucidate events.

However, because the world did not end, the arrival of the eschaton had constantly to be redated later and later, and historical apocalyptic works needed to be redacted and brought up to date or new ones produced. This is clearly the case with the later additions to the *Jāmāsp Nāmag* and the *Ẓand ī Wahman Yasn*, although the "Apocalypse of Samuel" also contains evidence of later retouching. The latest versions of such texts appear to have been the ones that survived, and it is worth asking when and why these texts ceased to be updated and were thereafter merely copied and preserved. Might that have had something to do with a subsiding of the socio-religious changes associated with the early Islamic period and the emergence of a new socio-religious order that was recognized as irreversible? At another level the continuing reapplication of earlier events in later contexts and the use of historical parallels from scripture are evidence of a typological view of history.

Finally, how far is it possible, or safe, to generalize about communal attitudes based on apocalyptic material? It certainly expresses someone's attitudes, but, for the most part, these seem to be individual voices. How can we situate the authors of these texts in their own community? Who was their intended audience? Who read or heard these texts? What impact or influence did they have? Why were they preserved? How wellknown were apocalyptic *aḥādīth*, and in which circles? How often were they cited and by whom? The analysis of *isnāds* might help in the case of *aḥādīth*, but, for the most part, the nature of apocalyptic literature is such that we are unlikely to answer these questions completely. For the time being it is useful to remember that apocalyptic expressions represent one kind of response among a wide spectrum of attitudes within the communities surveyed in the following articles.

<sup>6</sup> This also occurs in Jewish apocalyptic literature. See Kedar, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Madelung, *op. cit.*, p. 185.